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Crisis Mangling and the Cuban Brigade

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The furor over a supposed brigade of Soviet combat troops, discovered in the fall of 1979 to be stationed in Cuba, should have been no more than a minor controversy within the U.S. intelligence community. Instead, an intense diplomatic storm ensued between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Revelation of the particular data on Soviet troops in Cuba which surfaced in 1979 would have stirred little public concern at any other time, but the information came to light in the volatile political environment of the Carter Administration's third year in office, as the Administration's management of relations with the Soviet Union came under mounting attack. In this atmosphere, a minor and inconclusive piece of intelligence became a political issue. The crisis which grew from public disclosure of the brigade discovery had disproportionate effects on the debate over ratification of the SALT II treaty, the course of U.S.-Soviet relations, and Soviet perceptions of American will and leadership. As Cyrus Vance recently said of the crisis:

"... I think it clearly hurt the ratification process, without any doubt. There was an erosion of the support for SALT prior to the Cuban brigade issue, but clearly it was a real blow that set us back substantially."¹

Most contemporary historians date the present chill in U.S.-Soviet relations from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. But in many ways, the brigade affair four months earlier was the turning point towards a higher level of hostility between the superpowers.

Those aware of the brigade crisis universally regard the incident as a low point in Carter Administration foreign policy, and perhaps even in the history of U.S.-Soviet relations. Ray Cline, Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the Kennedy years, dubbed the incident at the time an exercise in "crisis mangling," rather than crisis management. And the International Institute for Strategic Studies even more contemptuously demoted the episode to a "storm in a teacup" in its annual review of politico-military events. Beyond the impression that a sequence of events took place which was confusing and perhaps badly managed by the United States, however, no one is quite certain exactly what came to pass and why. Earlier incidents involving the issue of Soviet forces in Cuba—the 1962 missile crisis, the 1969-70 controversy over Soviet naval facilities at Cienfuegos, and even a minor debate in 1978 about Soviet MiG-23 aircraft on the island—have been studied and mined for their significance. But the brigade incident remains a question mark for many of the individuals who made American foreign policy at the time, not to mention for the public. What really happened? Was there a combat brigade in Cuba? Why did the United States negotiate at length with the Soviets on the issue? What did the Carter Administration ask the Soviets to do about the brigade, and how did the Russians respond? What were the effects of the event, and what lessons are to be learned?

A closer look at the incident reveals some aspects contrary to the conventional wisdom. Even those most informed about the brigade affair vilify former Idaho Senator Frank Church, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1979, as the main American alarmist about the brigade,

¹ Interview with Robert Scheer in Scheer's *With Enough Shovels* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 226.

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